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ABSTRACT

Stories are one means of communication between people of all ages. The telling of stories or listening to them is a part of a tradition as old as human experience. This guide gives practical advice, curriculum suggestions, and story examples for teachers interested in using storytelling with young children. The following are the sections: (1) "Sharing Stories with Young Children"; (2) "Story-telling and Story Reading"; (3) "Telling Children Our Stories"; (4) "The Story of the Strange Noises"; (5) "Telling Children Their Stories"; (6) "The Day the Car Broke Down"; (7) "Telling Children Stories that Belong To Us," emphasizing that not all traditional stories are suited to a very young audience; (8) "The Story of the Peddlar and His Caps"; (9) "Aboriginal Stories"; (10) "How the Birds Got Their Colours"; (11) "What Makes a Story Good to Tell?", asserting the need for a recognizable theme, clear plot, and believable characters; (12) "How Shall We Tell Stories"; (13) "Beginning to Tell Stories"; (14) "Materials to Use in Story-Telling"; (15) "The Story of the Little Red House"; (16) "The Question of Props"; (17) "What Settings are Suited to Story-Telling"; (18) "Where Do We Find Stories to Tell?"; and (19) "Learning a Story to Tell." (BGC)

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Let's tell stories

Sharing stories with young children

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Let's tell stories

Sharing stories with young children

About the author

Jane Smyth B.Ed (Early Childhood) Dip S.K.T.C. teaches in the Child Care Department of the Canberra Institute of Technology.

She enjoys sharing stories with young children and encouraging students to develop their own story-telling skills.

Jane is a freelance writer whose work has been broadcast by ABC Radio and Canberra Stereo Public Radio. She is a member of the ACT Story-Tellers' Guild and a full member of the Australian Society of Authors.

Currently, Jane is working as part of the project management team of the National Child Care Curriculum Project.

Photographs

Barry Brown (cover & text)
Louise Tigchelaar

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There is no right or wrong way to tell a story.
Perhaps you will forget the beginning, or the middle or the end …
Ask the little ones their happiest moments. Ask the teenagers the scariest time of their lives …
Give the old ones the floor. Go all around in the circle …
Ask each person. You will see. Everyone will be warmed, sustained by the circle of stories you create together. ❦

Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1993)

Let's tell stories

Sharing stories with young children

All of us, in different ways, are involved in story-telling. Stories are one of the great means of communication between people of all ages. Myths, legends, folk tales, fairy tales, parables, oral histories, anecdotes and even family jokes and yarns—these are all part of our oral heritage. When we tell stories or when we listen we are part of a tradition which is as old as human experience.

When we tell stories we are part of a tradition which is as old as human experience

Most of us do not think of ourselves as story-tellers and we may compare ourselves with those who have highly developed story-telling skills. The truth is, we are all story-tellers. Whether we recount an embarrassing moment or faithfully tell *The Story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, or share the events of a frantic day, we are using the ancient skills of the story-teller. Call it an anecdote, call it a yarn, call it an outburst—when we use voice and body to convey meaning, when we engage listeners, even briefly, so that they imagine the situations and people we describe—we are taking part in an ageless oral tradition of sharing stories.

Story-telling is important for young children because it engages their imagination more than any other form of sharing stories. It is a creative and expressive activity which demands a connection between teller and listener. The closeness which results from sharing a story is especially suited to building relationships with young children in small groups.

Story-telling engages young children's imaginations

Sharing stories

Stories are passed on in many ways—through song, dance, drama (including puppetry and mime), prose, poetry, painting, drawing, sculpture, film, radio, television and even via the Internet.

Not all of us use these various media but we can all learn to tell stories in words so that we share experiences—real or imaginary—to entertain, to inspire, to teach and to stretch the imagination of children. We can develop the ability to draw adults and children together in the close and shared experience of story-telling.

In a society in which the individual may now be over-exposed to the visual image, story-telling is undergoing something of a revival. In cafes and around campfires, in schools and libraries, galleries and pubs, the skills of story-tellers are creating links between people of all ages.

Story-telling is not the same as story-reading although the two are often confused

Story-telling and story-reading

Story-telling is not the same as story-reading although the two are often confused. Both are important and young children should have opportunities to be involved in both ways of experiencing stories.

Story-telling depends on the *spoken word* to connect a story-teller and listener so that a story is created in the *imagination*.

Story-reading depends on a *focus on print* (words and/or illustrations) for the understanding and appreciation of a story.

Story-reading depends on a focus on print; story-telling depends on the spoken word

Telling children *our* stories

Young children enjoy hearing about familiar experiences and they especially enjoy *our* stories. We can tell them about the time we fell off our bicycle or about the winds which turned umbrellas inside out or about the echidna we found in the garden. We can offer anecdotes about when we were small. We can recount simple tales of grandma's life when she was young.or tell of the exciting, amusing or eccentric deeds of a family member or friend. These may not have a neat structure or exciting conclusion and may not seem like 'real' stories but they offer something that no book, video or film can give—the mutual understanding and connection of teller and listener and the total engagement of the imagination.

When adults recount incidents from their own lives they use voice and gesture to illustrate and they become

involved. When we tell stories to children we must use these same skills. We do not have to be actors. We do not need tricks or gimmicks. What we need is the ability to connect with our listeners and involve them. To be a successful story-teller we must make the story work for our listeners by enjoying the story with them.

We need to connect with our listeners and involve them

In this way the discovery of a bird's nest can be made to work as a simple story.

The Story of the Strange Noises

I had a very big surprise yesterday morning. I was just going outside to pick up the newspaper and I was walking along the verandah when I heard little noises like this: 'Cheep, cheep, cheep… cheep, cheep, cheep …' and they went on and on.

So I listened very carefully and the noises seemed to be coming from an old cupboard where we keep flower pots and a watering can and all sorts of things for the garden. I crouched down near the cupboard and listened. I could hear 'Cheep, cheep, cheep … cheep, cheep, cheep.' So I opened the cupboard door. It was dark in the cupboard and I couldn't see anything but some old gloves but I could still hear 'Cheep, cheep, cheep … cheep, cheep, cheep' So I went inside, found my torch and went back to the cupboard, opened the door, shone the torch and peeped in. Then I discovered what was making the noise! Right in the corner of the cupboard, tucked in under a shelf, was a bird's nest and in the nest were four baby birds all with their mouths opening and closing and all saying 'Cheep, cheep, cheep … cheep, cheep cheep'.

I turned off the torch and closed the cupboard door gently and went away to the other end of the verandah and waited … Then I saw the mother bird arriving with food in her beak for the babies. She went behind the cupboard and when she came out she wasn't carrying any food so, when she had flown off, I went back, very quietly and looked behind the cupboard and I saw a hole where the wood was rotten. So that's where she was going in and out to her babies. Now, when I hear 'Cheep, cheep, cheep … cheep, cheep, cheep' I'll know it's those hungry babies waiting to be fed. I'll be watching every day because those babies will grow and when they are big enough they'll learn to fly. One day they'll leave the nest and fly away. Then there'll be no more strange noises on the verandah—no more 'Cheep, cheep, cheep … cheep, cheep, cheep …'

Every time I open the old cupboard on the verandah I'll think of those little birds and the big surprise they gave me.

Telling children *their* stories

Young children, being egocentric, enjoy *their* stories—accounts of events which involve them and the people they know. They appreciate familiar details.

They love to hear stories in which they have a part, especially if they play a significant role—'The day you were born'; 'The day you had a terrible fall and broke your collar-bone jumping off the kitchen chair'; 'The day you found something which had been lost for a long, long time.' Even if the child was a minor player in the events being recalled the story can be told from this child's point of view thereby relegating the listener to the status of central character.

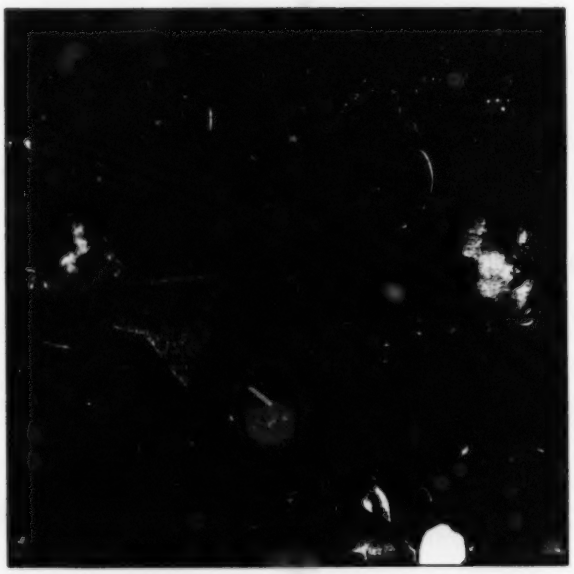
Children love to hear stories in which they have a part, especially if they play a significant role

When we put the familiar into story form we offer a new interpretation—we help children to structure the events of their own lives.

In this simple way the scene is set, the child is established as a character, there is dialogue and repetition, the story is underway, and the teller has opportunities to make marvellous, even improbable, sound effects which children will love.

For very young children stories can be told simply; for older children stories can be successfully embellished with rich, imagined detail and extended to include unlikely events and exaggerated characters.

Whether the story is realistic or fantastic, short and simple or rich and complex, matters less than whether the teller is able to involve the listeners.



Older people, especially grandparents, are a rich source of stories and are often able to give time to share.
When the telling is child-centred, the listener will enjoy unhurried attention and the physical closeness of the experience.

The Day the Car Broke Down

'Well, one day, after we had been to the supermarket, we were in the car, going home along the road and you were in the back nearly asleep. Suddenly, I heard a noise which sounded like this … '… (Make the noise) …' So I turned off the radio. 'Listen,' I said, 'What's that noise?' You listened but you didn't know. Then I heard it again and it sounded like this.. '… (Make the noise) …' 'Listen,' I said, 'What's that noise?' We listened but we still didn't know so I kept driving. Then, suddenly you sat up …'

Telling children stories that belong to us

There are stories many of us know. *The Story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *The Story of Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*, the epics of Monkey and the story of *The Rainbow Serpent*—these and countless other folk tales, fairy tales and fables are known in many cultures and often in different forms. We can tell stories that belong to us in just the same way as they were told to us and we can invite others to tell us *their* stories.

Care must be taken in the choosing—not all traditional stories … are suited to a very young audience

Care must be taken in the choosing—not all traditional stories, even though they are old favourites, are suited to a very young audience. The purpose of the teller is to share and to delight. Stories which leave the young listener confused or with unresolved fears do not create increased understanding or the closeness which should come from sharing stories.

One story which has satisfied listeners of all ages for thousands of years is *The Story of the Pedlar and his Caps*, sometimes known as 'The Pedlar and the Monkeys'. Beginning with 'Once upon a time …' we are introduced to the central character and his one remarkable quality—he sell caps and stores his goods, in an unusual way, on his head. The detail is important because it invites us to imagine his caps and we become involved as we picture them. All the elements of a good story are here—an interesting character, an unusual (but believable) situation, a refrain (to provide repetition), a dilemma, a climax and a satisfying resolution.

The Story of the Peddlar and his Caps

Once upon a time there was a pedlar who sold caps. On top of his head he wore his old brown cap. On top of the brown cap he put his yellow caps. On top of the yellow caps he put his blue caps. On top of the blue caps he put his green caps. And on the very top he put his red caps. Then he would go down to a village, walking up one street and down another, calling 'Caps for sale! Caps for sale!'

One day nobody wanted to buy a cap, not even a red one 'Well,' thought the pedlar, 'this will be a good day to just take a rest.' So he walked off to the edge of the village, where he found a large tree. He settled himself down by the tree, balancing all the caps against the trunk of the tree and went sound asleep.

He slept for a long time. When he woke up, the first thing he did was to feel for his caps. All he could find was his old brown cap. He looked in front of him.

No caps.

He looked to the left of him.

No caps.

He looked to the right of him.

No caps.

He walked all around behind the tree.

He looked up into the tree.

There he saw monkeys and every monkey had a cap on.

'You monkeys, you,' he shouted, shaking his finger at them, 'You give me back my caps.' But the monkeys only shook their fingers back at him and shouted, 'Tsk,Tsk,Tsk!'

'You monkeys, you,' he shouted, shaking the finger of his other hand at them, 'you give me back my caps' But the monkeys only shook their fingers back at him and shouted 'Tsk, Tsk, Tsk!'

'You monkeys, you,' he shouted as he stamped his right foot, 'you give me back my caps.'

But the monkeys only shouted back at him, 'Tsk,Tsk,Tsk.'

'You monkeys, you,' he pleaded as he stamped his left foot, 'give me back my caps.' But the monkeys only answered back, 'Tsk,Tsk,Tsk.'

Then the pedlar was so angry he took off his old brown cap and threw it on the ground.

Every monkey took his cap off and threw it on the ground. So the pedlar gathered all his caps together again. On top of his head he put his old brown cap. On top of the brown cap he put his yellow caps. On top of the yellow caps, he put his blue caps. On top of the blue caps he put his green caps. And on the very top he put his red caps.

Then he went back to the village, up one street and down another, calling, 'Caps for sale! Caps for sale!' ❦

Author unknown. In Tooze, R. (1960) *Storytelling.*

Aboriginal stories

All groups have their own stories. Peoples with strong oral traditions such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have many stories which satisfy young children. (Some stories deal with important or sacred information or knowledge and must not be shared without permission.) *How the Birds Got Their Colours* is simple as well as highly descriptive and rich in meaning. It was told during Multicultural Week, 1996, at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, by Pauline McLeod and is reproduced here with permission of the story-teller. The story is told throughout NSW by a number of tribes—this version belongs to the Wiradjuri people.

Become a teller of tales who captures an audience with words

How the Birds Got Their Colours

When the world was young, in the Dreamtime, a rainbow appeared in the sky. This rainbow appeared to take colour from all around it and it grew. It took all the reds, and the blues, the oranges and the greens and it kept growing and growing. Then right before your very eyes the rainbow exploded and the pieces fell down to the ground.

As the pieces fell towards the ground they changed to all the birds that we know today. Some of the birds didn't like the feeling of falling so they cried out in horror 'Aahh, Aahh, Aahh, Aahh,' just like the crow does today. Other birds thought it was funny and they started to laugh out loud, 'Haaaaa, Haaaaa, Haaaaa,' just like the kookaburra. Other birds fell straight down to the ground and started running around, making a noise like this 'Ummmp, ummmp, ummmp,' just like the emu and other birds loved the feeling of flying and they spread their wings and started to sing. And that is how the birds got their colours and voices today, because of that rainbow in the Dreamtime.

Pauline McLeod shares stories with children at Canberra's 1996 Floriade Festival.

What makes a story good to tell?

Stories for young children need a recognisable theme, a simple, clearly developed plot with believable characters and quick action. A clear introduction helps children to become familiar with characters. Dramatic action is important but elements of fear and sadness require a satisfying resolution for young listeners.

Tell something you enjoy so that children may share your pleasure

How shall we tell stories?

There are as many ways to tell as there are tellers. Story-telling requires only a teller, a listener and a tale. The body should be used expressively.

Voice, facial expressions and body gestures are the essential tools of the story-teller.

Voice

Characters should have distinctive voices and these must be consistent if the listener is to follow the action. For young children the voice of a narrator should belong to the teller who must 'own' the story and share it.

Facial expressions and gestures

Telling is done with words and silence and it is important to remember that pauses are very important in giving the story effect. The head and hands are the parts of the body most used. Eye contact is important so the teller must look at listeners one by one while telling. Eyes convey feeling (especially surprise, wonder, happiness and sadness). Hands may be used to demonstrate and give meaning but, take care, excessive hand action may detract from the story. Tellers are advised to take a story, make it their own and *share* it.

Tell something you enjoy, tell it simply but with your full involvement, and trust the story to do its work.

Voice, facial expressions and body gestures are the essential tools of the story-teller

Beginning to tell stories

Story-telling involves skill and needs practice, so it is wise to start simply and be prepared to improve gradually. Most novice story-tellers quickly discover the magic and shared pleasures of story-telling but not all children immediately accept this story form with its lack of stimulating visual images. Some beginning story-tellers report children saying 'Where's the book?' Tellers may be challenged—not all children will welcome being required to listen and imagine and some will appreciate materials which help them focus on the story content.

'Begin at the beginning,' the King said, very gravely, 'and go on till you come to the end: then stop.'

Alice in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll.

Materials to use in story-telling

Children may enjoy a puppet, a picture or an object to introduce a story. These props are useful in gaining attention or settling groups. They should enhance but not dominate a told story and, having been used, can be set aside for the duration of the story (e.g.,'Now we can put the possum over here so he can listen with us'). This technique is especially suited to small groups when time can be given for all children to handle the materials.

Some children will appreciate materials which help them focus on the story content

The Story of the Little Red House

Once upon a time there was a little boy who had played almost all day. He had played with all his toys and all the games he knew and he could not think of anything else to do. So he went to his mother and asked, 'Mother, what shall I do now?'

His mother said, 'I know about a little red house with no doors and no windows and a beautiful star inside. You can find it if you look for it.'

So the little boy went outside and there he met a little girl. He said, 'Do you know where there is a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside?'

The little girl said, 'No, I don't know where there is a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside, but you can ask my daddy. He is a farmer and he knows lots of things. He's down by the barn and maybe he can help you.' So the little boy went to the farmer down by the barn and said, 'Do you know where there is a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside?'

'No,' said the farmer, 'I don't know, but why don't you ask Grandmother. She is in her house up on the hill. She is very wise and knows many things. Maybe she can help you.'

So the little boy went up the hill to Grandmother's and asked, 'Do you know where there is a little red house with no doors and no windows and a beautiful star inside?' 'No,' said Grandmother, 'I don't know, but you ask the wind for the wind goes everywhere, and I'm sure he can help you.'

So the little boy went outside and asked the wind, 'Do you know where I can find a little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside?' And the wind said 'OHHHH! OOOOOOOOOOO!' And it sounded to the little boy as if the wind said, 'Come with me.' So the little boy ran after the wind. He ran through the grass and into the orchard and there on the ground he found the little house—the little red house with no doors and no windows and a star inside! He picked it up, and it filled both his hands. He ran home to his mother and said, 'Look, mother! I found the little red house with no doors and no windows, but I cannot see the star.'

So this is what his mother did (teacher cuts the apple). 'Now I see the star!' said the little boy. (Teacher says to children) 'Do you?'

Anonymous. In Machado, J.M. (1990) *Early Childhood Experiences in Language Arts.*

Note: This story may be easily adapted to have 'a little *girl*' as the central character.

The question of props

Simple props representing something central to the story may capture children's attention and enhance the story (e.g., a cap, a bird's nest, a photo of a child). Many superb puppets and felt shapes are constructed and used but elaborate props are not essential (as campfire and ghost stories have proved). Props often give great amusement but true story-telling should never become a puppet show or a performance with pieces of felt. Such activities may be valuable and effective experiences with rich language opportunities but they do not demand the total engagement of the imagination or a close connection between teller and listener.

Sometimes, materials are essential

To transmit a story only the body is required. One value for young children is in the simplicity of this technique. When we tell stories, we are modelling an age-old practice and one which children can emulate.

Some stories require materials, such as the old favourite on page 10 which depends for its success on the provision of a real, red apple and a knife for cutting.

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Tell stories simply but with full involvement

What settings are suited to story-telling?

The size of group or audience will influence the choice of setting. For indoor settings, a quiet, well ventilated space with floor-covering, cushions or comfortable seating is essential.

Outdoor settings may be suitable, but noise, distractions and glare should be minimised. The teller must have eye contact with each listener. The audience must be close so that responses are shared but not so close that comfort is compromised.

When sharing stories with young children it is important to have additional space as small, informal groups may quickly grow.

Where do we find stories to tell?

There are thousands of stories suitable for sharing with young children. They may be found in libraries, bookshops, archives, resource centres, second-hand shops and garage sales.

Stories may be gathered from family members, friends and colleagues, newspapers, diaries and photograph albums. (Remember to seek permission where necessary.)

A personal notebook of stories will quickly become a valued resource, especially if it includes original material.

The size of group or audience will influence the choice of setting

Learning a story to tell

There are many ways to learn stories. Here is a suggested approach:

1. Choose only those stories you would like to share.
2. Consider your audience. (Will this story suit the size of your group as well as their interests and ability to listen?)
3. Review the story for plot and sequence.
4. Review the story and visualise it, carefully noticing details and patterns.
5. Read the story aloud.
6. Consider the effect you would like the story to have. (Can you find a 'voice' for all the characters? Do you wish to create a mood, arouse compassion, make your audience laugh or cry or all of these?)
7. Learn the first and last sentences as well as any key phrases or refrains but *do not memorise the story word for word.*
8. Practice telling the story to yourself in your own words. (Cue cards may be used.)
9. Tell the story often so that it remains in your repertoire and keep a copy and/or tape for revision.
10. Share the story with listeners and with other story-tellers.

Some children are fortunate enough to be told stories and to be led by a story-teller to characters more real and scenes more wonderful than they could ever have found illustrated in books or depicted on screens. Long after the last words of the story, the individual and highly original images remain. When children supply their own visual version of the action they project themselves into the minds and bodies of the characters. They engage in a creative activity in which they feel for other people and, for a short time, they become these other people—their experience is widened and their understanding is increased.

'If you want to try story-telling, you'll need to pay some attention to selecting, shaping and presenting a story, but the main thing is to plunge in.'

Bob Barton & David Booth (1991)

Through story-telling, adults are able to share enjoyment with young children, perpetuate an old and valued tradition, foster the imagination of their listeners and create links between people of all ages.

'We need the ability to visualise how good, or how awful, or how uncomfortable, or how delightful life would be if ...'

Author Lynn Reid Banks from the UK. Keynote address, Second National Conference of the Children's Book Council of Australia, Melbourne, 1994.

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Pauline McLeod of Bapu, Traditional Aboriginal Dance Company of the ACT, for permission to use *How the Birds Got Their Colours*, a story told at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra during Multicultural Week, February 17–23, 1996.

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There will be six issues of the newsletter in 1996. The newsletter is produced by National Office staff and is a way of keeping the field informed of developments and issues as they occur. Over recent years particular attention has been paid to political events and government policy changes. With so much happening it is likely that 1996 issues will continue this focus.

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The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA) is a leading specialist publisher of early childhood literature. It actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children from 0–8 and their families, and supports the important role of parents. AECA is also the national umbrella organisation for Children's Services.

As well as producing the *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, *Every Child* magazine, the *AECA Resource Book Series*, a newsletter and special titles, AECA markets books and videos on early childhood topics from other companies and organisations.

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